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The Vitality of portraiture

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The Vitality of Portraiture
By
Diana Smolenski

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Mr. Matthews tilted his head a little to one side, like a bird. "The thing I like about them," he said, "is the way you've managed to catch that look of not belonging - how was it you said? - not altogether belonging to today. There ought to be something timeless about a woman. Not about a man - we've always been more present-minded.... I don't know what the matter is with women today," he said, sighing. "In my opinion, they lack some quality which they used to have - some quality of timelessness which made them seem to belong to all ages at once. Something eternal...."

-Robert Nathan, "Portrait of Jennie."

I am a painter of people, of faces, recording lives on canvas. I would not say that I love people. They make me nervous and uncomfortable (particularly in large crowds); however, they fascinate me. I have spent hours observing their mannerisms and expressions. I have absorbed through them much of what life offers simply by watching them pass by me on streets, buses, and in cafés, parks, barrooms, and diners.

I am interested in describing people through visual imagery and revealing who they are to others. My concern is not merely to duplicate reality, but to seek a higher level which transcends reality. Reality, defined by the Random House Dictionary, constitutes the state or quality of being real, the external world that exists independently of per-

ception.¹ Everyone perceives his own world differently from another. With this in mind, I will be examining the attitudes with which certain artists regard and perceive their subjects, drawing upon their ideas to form specific concepts and conclusions. I would like to identify the elements common to all portraits which forces appearance to give way to universal truths. If such elements can be determined, it is my intent to explore and write about them.

1. Jess Stein, The Random House Dictionary of The English Language, (Ballantine Books, New York, 1978), p. 744.

There appears to be a specific attitude which the successful portrait has taken on. This attitude is one which communicates some understanding of the meaning of life. Portraits represent the continuous, ongoing process of life which makes them more than mere replicas of life. It has been said that in life, as in art, the whole truth is the healing truth. Life and art it seems are united. This feeling stems from a selfish, burning desire to reveal the cruel, harsh existence of mankind through portraiture.

The artist who depicts such honest portrayals is a victim of his own existence. It's as if his painting of those less fortunate offers him sweet solace. "The most effective consolation in every misfortune and every affliction is to observe others who are more unfortunate than we."² Vincent Van Gogh, the Dutch Impressionist, sought "serious sorrow" in his work and "...became a painter in order to solve an inner conflict by which he was torn, to take his revenge in the domain of art for the failures he had experienced in his life."³ He led an unbalanced, painfully tragic life and experienced a desperate need to love and be loved. "His cravings for human associations found its deepest release in painting men and women."⁴ Van Gogh was capable of conveying poverty and pain in his art due to a personal battle with life. His vital images possess a power to reveal and to console. Even Rembrandt, one of the

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2. David R. Cheney and Steven Sanders, The Meaning of Life, (Prentice-Hall, Inc., Englewood Cliffs, New Jersey, 1980), p. 26.
 3. Frank Elgar, Van Gogh, (Leon Amiel Publishers, New York, New York, 1975), p. 1.
 4. Daniel Catton Rich, Van Gogh, Paintings and Drawings, (Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York, New York, 1949), p. 8.

great masters of all time, sought such realizations in his work.

"...as Rembrandt aged and experienced the reality of emotion instead of merely studying its surface signs, he used his face to convey a deeper meaning, pitilessly portraying the slow ruin of his own flesh, reflecting the tides of skepticism and courage, melancholy and calm that coursed through him. In so doing he captured the universal...."5

It does not seem surprising to me that feelings of despair, perhaps regret, should live with us throughout our lifetime. This occurs particularly with the portrait artist. Daniel Halévy wrote of his friend and companion Edouard Degas.

"There is no doubt but what throughout his life the tragedy of bereavement deeply moved Degas. The remarkable thing is that this emotion never lessened. When he was very old I saw Degas travel across the whole of France to attend the funeral of an old friend. He was not at all given to metaphysical speculation, but grief expanded his mind and his emotions attained a higher level."6

I feel there is something to be said for pain and suffering; it makes for a stronger individual. We've all experienced how sadness, depression, and misery, as strange as it may seem, often soothes the battered soul. Alice Neel, a contemporary artist who considers herself a collector of souls, put it this way. "You know what the great thing in the world is? Loneliness."⁷ I'm not afraid of being alone. In fact, I sometimes prefer it. My work lends itself to this solitary, isolated feeling; figures set strictly

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5. Robert Wallace, The World of Rembrandt, (Time Life Books, Inc., New York, New York, 1968), p. 7.
 6. Daniel Halévy, My Friend Degas, (Wesleyan University Press, Middletown, Connecticut, 1964), p. 26.
 7. Ted Castle, "Alice Neel", Art Forum, 1983, p. 41.

within space, with little or no indication of time or place. The portraits speak for themselves in an honest, forthright manner. They are blunt, stark, and perhaps overly obvious in their candidness; however, they seem to possess a mysterious, intriguing quality about them. They are an extension of my loneliness. Charles Baudelaire, the great nineteenth century French poet and critic, felt, "It is one of those wonderful privileges of art that the horrible, when artistically expressed, and pain, if stylized and patterned, fill the mind with quiet joy."⁸ Although loneliness seems to loom over us, a reminder of our doomed existence, it instills in us an enormous will to endure. The person who learns to accept his own condition has gained some understanding of the meaning of life. Alfred Leslie, after completing a self-portrait during a despairing period of his life, felt his work had attained another level of meaning, "...the artist's feeling that life must be lived with courage and vulnerability."⁹ When I experience a work of art, I feel removed from reality, becoming overwhelmed by its presence. While working, I am carried to a level of extreme emotional intensity. This emotion controls the spirit and takes advantage of my strengths and weaknesses, revealing vulnerabilities. The process is a soul-searching experience for me which provides a strong emotional release, allowing me to discover who I really am.

The artist who chooses to portray life realizes his destiny from the start. According to Alice

8. M.G. Dortu and Phillippe Huisman, Toulouse-Lautrec, The Great Impressionists, (Doubleday and Company Inc., Garden City, New York, 1971), p. 38.

9. Frank H. Goodyear, Jr., Contemporary American Realism Since 1960, (New York Graphic Society, Boston, Massachusetts, 1981), p. 64.

Neel, "I often say that I'm serving a sentence here.... well, life."¹⁰ He accepts it and is prepared to carry it out. He is aware of time and its limitations and knows that happiness is fleeting and only a temporary state.

"...no man is happy but strives his whole life long after a supposed happiness which he seldom attains, and even if he does it is only to be disappointed with it; as a rule, however, he finally enters harbour shipwrecked and dismayed. In the second place, however, it is all one whether he has been happy or not in a life which has consisted merely of a succession of transient present moments and now is at an end."¹¹

-Arthur Schopenhauer

He comes to terms with this and early on discovers that so called "happy" people seem shallow for they fail to grasp reality and are blind to the truth.

"Blue cherries and cinnamon colored lilacs engraved on an ivory forest occur only in the minds of happy people. Great ladies in gowns with cherry blossoms in their hair can only be seen when you look very closely - Dark walls and daggers are far more easily found, and awakening to life can be very gray."

-Michelle Durrssen, "Inside Summerhill."

I agree with this, and it is for this reason that you seldom see a portrait grinning or smiling. (Nevertheless, I have painted smiling figures on occasion). It is disturbing and unsettling, making one feel uncomfortable in its presence. It is a temporary moment trapped in time and not one of lasting remembrance. The artist must fix a pose which conveys a sense of

10. Castle, p. 41.

11. Cheney and Sanders, pp. 34-35.

permanence, and which will last for an eternity. So he does not paint smiling faces, but instead those more subtle expressions which better describe the human predicament. Such faces as these have roamed the universe for centuries and possess a strength and character which separates them from the ordinary, making them unique.

I am discovering that it is a sense of tragedy transmitted to the portrait which lends such vitality to its image. Feelings of loss, despair, and loneliness and looks of pensiveness, melancholy, and wistfulness are those raised in everyone, some more than others, at one time or another. These sentiments are the universal truths shared by all mankind which reveal the truth about life, and it is essential that whoever portrays such truths must himself have grasped an understanding of life's meaning.

"I felt that if I wanted to live and understand the meaning of life, I ought naturally to look for it, not among those who had lost the meaning of life and wanted to kill themselves, but among those billions departed and living men who had been carrying their masses of deceased and living men, - not learned and wealthy, but simply that lived or had lived, all with rare exceptions, did not fit into my subdivisions, and that I could not recognize them as not understanding the question, because they themselves put it and answered it with surprising clearness. Nor could I recognize them as Epicureans, because their lives were composed rather of privations and suffering than enjoyment."¹²

-Leo Tolstoy

12. Cheney and Sanders, p. 20.

It is clear that the artist who has suffered and struggled, and who prefers solitude to grandeur, can better capture the power and feeling in the people he paints, for he is just as they are. It was Oskar Kokoschka who recognized the fact that we can experience the world only as a datum of consciousness. To him this meant that vision and insight into the world was the key to understanding it. His paintings required a spectator, who, like the artist, could identify with the life depicted in them, and who is prepared, to use a phrase from one of Kokoschka's letters, "to become one with life by actively participating in it."¹³

People have always been drawn to portraiture as document, as the revelation of character, and as the emergence of life on canvas. The question at hand, however, is who are these subjects, and why is it they strike such deep chords within us? For reasons unknown, we become attached to these faces as if somehow related to them and find it difficult to tear ourselves away. They haunt us and linger on in the back of our minds. Why is this, and what about them intrigues us so? What is it that holds our attention so fiercely? Could it be that they do symbolize our own existence, and, in each of them, we see ourselves? I would like now to begin examining the artist's choice of subject matter as well as the attitudes which develop between them.

Edouard Degas developed an unbiased attitude towards his subject matter, transforming traditional

13. Dr. Heinz Spielmann, Oskar Kokoschka, (Marlborough Gallery Inc., New York, New York, 1981), pp. 7-8.

themes and replacing them with fascinating scenes of everyday life. He painted dancers and women bathing, creating unforgettable images of unmemorable facts, using informal poses. His primary concern was to make the viewer consciously aware of the quality of ordinary modern life and, at the same time, capture an illusion of life without distorting it.¹⁴ What I like and admire so much about Degas' work is how he exploited the more "casual" gestures and movements of the human figure: a woman yawning, a girl with crossed arms leaning with her body over a table, or an attendant adjusting the skirt of a dancer. These images are absolutely delightful.

By studying Edouard Manet's choice of models, we learn much about his attitude toward society and women. Manet chose his sitters and subjects carefully and intentionally, and many were independent working women who earned their freedom as kept women, waitresses, and barmaids.

"By presenting women in a new light, as autonomous, active intelligences instead of passive bodies, he also discovered the modern woman; Manet flinched no more from the challenge of her strength than she averted her gaze of defiance from any who would render her less than equal."¹⁵

Toulouse-Lautrec was also very fond of women. His paintings consisted of a generation of ladies who resided at the Moulin Rouge, where he recorded life as he found it. Lautrec was never at ease

14. Keith Roberts, Degas, (E.P. Dutton and Company, Inc., Oxford, England, 1976), pp. 5-11.

15. Barbara Rose, "Manet's Challenge". Vogue, 1983 p. 717.

painting professional models, and it was only when genuinely captivated by a subject that his inspirations flowed freely. While passing a young woman with auburn hair dressed as a factory girl, Lautrec once exclaimed, "Isn't she fantastic! And how ripe she looks! If only I could get her to pose for me, that would be wonderful."¹⁶ Lautrec's ability to convey such warmth in his sultry characters teaches us "...the universality of the spirit and of beauty, which lies not in choosing only what one desires to see, but quite simply in learning to see - that is, to see and appreciate things as they are."¹⁷ This intuitive ability to recognize hidden qualities is one which I most appreciate. It is the aloof character with the strangely shy disposition who strikes me and triggers a sensation. Something just a little off or not exactly right intrigues me and catches my eye. It could be the clothing or style of dress, but I think it is mostly the way they handle themselves which gains my attention. Some people are totally fascinating.

The artist holds a certain respect for his subject and relates to his predicament. A bond has grown between the two which accounts for the true to life depiction the artist portrays. This assists him in communicating one step further its universal meaning, lifting it from its usual context, transcending reality onto canvas. The artist strives for another reality in an attempt to perceive a deeper consciousness which will effect all mankind.

16. Dortu and Huisman, p. 23.

17. Dortu and Huisman, p. 46.

Vincent Van Gogh used the picture "not to imitate appearances or humour the tastes of a cultivated society, but to recreate the world according to his own intelligence and sensibility."¹⁸ Appearance is merely an outer shell which protects the fragile surface beneath. Secret vulnerabilities remain hidden behind smiling faces, and it is these weaknesses, when acknowledged, which make us aware of each other and the conditions we all share. In a letter to his brother Theo, Vincent wrote, "I feel much sympathy for them (the charcoal-burners and weavers) and should think myself happy if I could draw such characters in such a way as to make them known to a public hitherto practically unaware of them."¹⁹ Van Gogh, an overly sensitive person who brooded continuously over the tragedy of life, used color as a means to express passion. "...it was color which ultimately served best to symbolize emotional states and meanings....through color he sought to convey 'the terrible passions of humanity'."²⁰ The use of color is very important in my work as well. Some people project certain colors, and these colors alone can set the mood or describe or define a person. I tend to use softly blended tones which suggest a certain airiness; however, I'm never certain which colors will predominate until very late in a canvas' execution. The colors seem to evolve (as do the shapes and shadows) by themselves. My selection of color is based on an intuitive reasoning. In fact,

18. Elgar, p. 18.

19. Elgar, p. 23.

20. Rich, p. 9.

when working from black and white photographs, I am forced to invent my own colors. An artist should never be too sure of himself; one needs to maintain some spontaneity in an effort to discover the impossible.

While studying portraiture, I have discovered a definite relationship existing between artist and subject. There is a continuous need to depict the whole picture as it truly is, but a strong, personal link between subject and artist must be present as well. According to David Levine, famed caricaturist, "...a work of art must contain evidence of the artist's concern for or with his subject; conversely, superficial involvement in the subject itself cannot in his view produce a good painting."²¹

The artist has involved himself with his subjects to the extent that he knows them; they are his friends and his family. Mary Cassatt, one of the few women artists of the Post Impressionistic era, repeatedly used the same models in her pictures. She, like Degas, rarely accepted formal commissions and preferred to depict only family and friends. Her choice of subject matter usually consisted of children, young girls, and women (particularly her nieces and nephews) who she felt allowed her to achieve a particular intimacy and familiarity with them.²² Alfred Leslie shares this same kind of an idea.

"It was a matter of my trying to find subjects that are generally discredited - subjects that have, perhaps, been treated

21. Thomas S. Buechner, The Arts of David Levine, (Alfred A. Knopf Inc., New York, New York, 1978), pp. ix-x.

22. E. John Bullard, Mary Cassatt, (Watson-Guptill Publications, New York, New York, 1972), pp. 18 and 68.

falsely by a lot of other painters, subjects that were part and parcel of the literature of painting - to take them and try to find truth in those subjects. I think there are truths in old people, truths to be seen in babies, nursing mothers, children, and family life. I may not be the one who is able to do it, but I think those subjects, inherently are fine subjects. And if I can't do it, then I hope that some quality of the effort that I make can be passed on to someone else who may have a better way of looking at it, maybe with more skills, more analytical strengths to make convincing the values of everyday life, including family life."²³

This is an important issue which I am confronted with daily. I paint persons with whom I am closely associated or related to. In so doing, I have been criticized for exploiting a selfish desire in creating a subject matter which is irrelevant to the public. I do not agree with this. I feel my portraits possess a quality which reaches out to everyone. The fact that I am personally involved with these subjects only helps to enhance this quality. These people serve as an extension of my own evolution which represents contemporary family life.

"These portraits of wives and husbands, children and grandchildren, mothers and fathers, in-laws, even family pets, expand upon the artist's personal life and can be as revealing of the artist as self-portraits. Such paintings stand as celebrations as well as testaments of affections, and allow the artist to explore and understand close relationships."²⁴

-Alfred Leslie

A union and commitment is established between artist and subject. "The interaction between art-

23. John Arthur, Realism/Photo Realism, (The Southwestern Art Association and John Arthur Library of Congress, Tulsa, Oklahoma, 1980) p. 13.

24. Goodyear, p. 67.

ist and sitter that produces a portrait is a complex and sometimes mysterious process."²⁵ Many artists are searching for some sort of psychological interpretation in their work. Oskar Kokoschka felt,

"When I paint a portrait, I am not concerned with the externals of a person - the signs of his clerical or secular eminence, or his social origins. It is the business of history to transmit documents on such matters to posterity. What used to shock people in my portraits was that I tried to intuit from the face, from its play of expressions, and from gestures, the truth about a particular person, and to recreate in my own pictorial language the distillation of a living being that would survive in memory."²⁶

Kokoschka was capable of unveiling the truth, expressed here during a sitting with a Doctor Emma Veronica Sanders.

"...she always seemed strangely distracted when she was sitting for me. Although on the surface calm and composed, her thoughts were obviously faraway, and her great, sad eyes, gazing into nothingness, made me think of a madwoman. It was this feeling that I expressed in my picture, as if I had a premonition that she would be in an asylum a few years later."²⁷

Alice Neel, one of the most significant portrait artists of the twentieth century, is one of my most favorite painters who looks for the raw, psychological truths in her subject. She has experienced a great deal of grief, pain, and sorrow in her own life which evokes strong, sympathetic feelings. In the past Neel had suffered two nerv-

25. Grace Glueck, "Revival of the Portrait", The New York Times Magazine, 1983, p. 57.

26. Spielmann, p. 15.

27. Spielmann, p. 15.

ous breakdowns, confinement to a suicidal ward, the death of an infant daughter, a broken marriage and has sustained several relationships with various lovers. I hold a great respect for this woman, who has recently gained fame and recognition. Neel, now eighty-four, feels it is important to talk to people. "They either feed off of life or they feed off of negating life....They either feed on accepting life utterly, like me, or else they feed off of denying that it exists."²⁸ Every person in the world is engaged in the struggle of life. It is important, however, to accept fate. I believe you are what you are when you are born. I am an artist; I am a painter. It is something which has been with me ever since childhood. It wasn't something I decided to grow up to be, it was something that grew within me. I wasn't given the choice. Unconsciously, subconsciously, I was drawn to it, and slowly became what I am, a painter. "On the whole, artists have a consistent personality. They seem to recognize that they are what they are from the start, which may account for their steadfast likes and dislikes, as well as their strong, often obstinate characters."²⁹ I agree, and often have been told that I possess a stubborn disposition myself.

While continuing my reading on Alice Neel, I discovered enormous similarities in the way we both work and think. Neel says, that while painting, insights come to her, but she does not know from where they come. She stops thinking of anything, and it is her subconscious working. Later, however, Neel

28. Castle, p. 36.

29. Avis Bermin, "When Artists Grow Old", Art News, 1983, p. 81.

says that when she paints, she doesn't think of anything except the subject and herself. "I hate pale reflections of people."³⁰ I share a similar feeling while painting. My mind travels, thoughts wonder, and I begin to recollect, reminisce, and regress. Bits and pieces of my past surface, and flashbacks occur. These thoughts are usually connected with the subject and have to do with previous associations, conversations, and interactions I've had with the subject. It is as if an unconscious force is gathering all this information, forcing me to, somehow, some way, convey this and put it down on canvas.

It is surprising the liberties one can take while working on a portrait. Although very much concerned with the subject, I am sometimes more hypnotized by portions of the subject's garment. Manipulating portions of the drapery and working darks and lights, shapes and sizes, the folds begin to take on an almost abstract quality. It is as if I lose sight of the subject for a moment, and I am entranced by these forms. Most good portrait artists, however, say they are less concerned with pleasing their subjects, using them to explore and extend their own art. Alex Katz, a big-league New York painter whose paintings resemble billboards, feels as follows. "In good portrait painting, as opposed to the society portrait, the style or the form of the painting relates to modern painting itself. With a portrait, you can try out new ideas. The most minor part of it is what they want."³¹ I am not overly concerned with pleasing the subject or capturing a perfect likeness of him. I try to strike a very strong resemblance, but seem more preoccupied with describing who he is through color and

30. Castle, pp. 37-38.

31. Glueck, p. 55.

use of space. My colors take on mysterious overtones, brilliant and vibrant at times, and subtle and cool at other times. This, combined with the large, selective areas of space, forces the viewer to come to direct, immediate terms with the subject, leaving him with little else to influence or impinge upon his interpretation.

The portrait can present problems if the artist is not particularly selective in his choice of subject matter. There is a specific subject one looks for which allows the artist to reveal expression. Alice Neel prefers sitters who reveal through their personalities the trauma and struggle of life. This is usually written on their faces.³²

"I can't make someone conventionally beautiful, and I don't like to paint conventional-looking people. I have the same attitude toward myself that I have toward everyone else. I never wanted to paint myself when I was younger because I was pretty and soft with a regular, boring face. I didn't think my spirit was what I looked like. When I went to art school, it worried me that I didn't have a strong nose or chin. I didn't look like my work, just as Casals looked like somebody's grocer."³³

When I choose my subjects, I look for a spiritual quality which resides in their facial expressions. For this reason, I have a tendency to paint women more than men. I feel women possess a wisdom men do not have. They are better at expressing their emotions as well as reasoning with them. Men are more concerned with upholding an image and maintaining that facade of stone continuously mistaken for strength. A woman's

32. Goodyear, p. 73.

33. Goodyear, p. 73.

vulnerabilities are her strengths, which make for the better portrait.

Each painting I do is extracted from a photograph. The image, however, is twice removed from the actual photograph before being transferred to canvas. Preliminary studies are made before it is finally gridded onto canvas. This is a process used by many artists including William Beckman, Chuck Close, Alex Katz, and many others. I feel working this way removes me from the photograph. The likeness I create is not perfect; however, the image is my own and not entirely the camera's. I blow the figure up to a large scale where I am mostly confronted with the head and upper torso. The facial expressions are what I am primarily concerned with, for they tell it all, particularly in the eyes which give way to tons of emotion and information. You can read a person fairly well from the look in their eyes, through gazes, as well as from gestures and posture. People have to be brought out by themselves, they must reveal something of themselves to express who they are. For Neel,

"Expressionism is an attitude toward the world, toward reality. It is the attempt to render the surface of things - including people - as a revelation of their depths, their interior meanings. People are things to such an artist, but all things are 'alive' - so one could just as easily say that all things are 'people'. Even when she paints a vase of flowers or an empty chair, she is not recording appearances; she is exposing the spiritual content embodied by appearances."³⁴

Alfred Leslie's portraits are monumental in size.

34. Everson Museum of Art, Paintings by Three American Realists: Alice Neel - Sylvia Sleigh - May Stevens, (Visual Artists Publications, Inc., Syracuse, New York, 1976), p. 7.

He uses them as a way of "throwing" his point across to you. He has aimed to make "pictures which demand the recognition of individual and specific people, where there was nothing to be looked at other than the person - straightforward, unequivocal and with a persuasive moral, even didactic tone."³⁵ This sense of isolating the figure, which I do on a smaller scale, I earnestly hope has a strong psychological impact on the viewer. It zeroes in on the subject, alienates it from the rest of its environment, and actually removes it from the rest of the world. This seclusion takes on a spiritual, heavenly quality which begins to transcend reality, revealing universal truths, giving all great portraits the majestic essence they possess. It was Vincent Van Gogh who longed "to paint men and women with that something of the eternal which the halo used to symbolize and we seek to give by actual radiance and vibration of color."³⁶

Art should be about life and not about art, life that is open and available to more than just a select few. This art should be made up of true representations and honest portrayals of the human predicament as we experience it within and outside ourselves. It is essential that the artist who depicts these conditions is himself sensitive to humanity and capable of revealing universal truths. These truths exist in those men and women who have suffered and endured the hardships of life, and who are accepting of each other. It is the artist's responsibility to transcend

35. Goodyear, p. 75.

36. Rich, p. 10.

reality, rather than replicate it, by giving to his images that special quality which lends to its magnificence, putting portraiture in a realm all of its own.

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